DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 363 527 SO 023 191

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TITLE	The Core Ideas of "Lessons from History: Essential Understandings and Historical Perspectives Students Should Acquire." ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education, Bloomington, IN.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	EDO-SO-93-5
PUB DATE	Jun 93
CONTRACT	RI88062009
NOTE	4p.
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses - ERIC Clearinghouse Products (071)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Citizenship Education; *Educational Research; Elementary Secondary Education; *History Instruction; *Research Reports; *Student Educational Objectives; United States History; World History
IDENTIFIERS	ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

This digest discusses "Lessons From History," the report of the National Center for History in the Schools at the University of California, Los Angeles. The report provides a rationale for the study of history throughout the K-12 curriculum and specifies core ideas, themes, and topics that undergird both content and performance standards in United States history and world history. The study of history must reflect the three ultimate purposes of education in a free society: to prepare individuals for (1) active citizenship, to safeguard liberty and justice; (2) a career of work, to sustain life; and (3) the private pursuit of happiness, or personal fulfillment. Many recent reports from a variety of sources have emphasized that the importance of history requires a significant increase in the time currently devoted to the subject in most schools. No less than four full years of history should be required of all students between grades 7-12, and history should also be included in ways appropriate to the students' capabilities in the K-6 grades. Three years and two years respectively are recommended for U.S. history and world history. Selecting specific historical topics and content requires an organizational structure based on enduring themes and questions that exemplify the human experience. This digest lists and discusses the major themes presented in "Lessons From History," namely: (1) the development and changing character of human societies; (2) the economic and technological development of societies, resulting in the continual quest to sustain and improve the quality of life; (3) peoples' understanding of themselves, their place in the universe, and the quest for meaning; and (4) the development of political theories and democracy. The digest concludes by describing seven principles found by the report to be associated with effective teaching and learning of history. A list of ERIC resources is included. (DK)

ED 363 527

The Core Ideas of Lessons From History: Essential Understandings and Historical Perspectives Students Should Acquire

by
C. Frederick Risinger

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SO 023 191

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ERIC Digest EDO-SO-93-5 June 1993

The Core Ideas of *Lessons From History: Essential Understandings and Historical Perspectives Students Should Acquire*

by C. Frederick Risinger

Lessons From History provides a rationale for the study of history throughout the K-12 curriculum and specifies core ideas, themes, and topics that undergird both content and performance standards in United States history and world history. ***Lessons From History*** was developed by the National Center for History in the Schools at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), with support from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). The report represents more than four years of collaborative work by distinguished historians, classroom teachers, and curriculum specialists.

The Case for History in Our Schools. The study of history must reflect the three ultimate purposes of education in a free society—to prepare individuals for (1) active citizenship, to safeguard liberty and justice; (2) a career of work, to sustain life; (3) the private pursuit of happiness, or personal fulfillment. Historical study supports all three goals, but is especially important in preparing students for citizenship and personal fulfillment.

Citizens without a common memory, based on common historical studies, may lapse into political amnesia, and be unable to protect freedom, justice, and self-government during times of national crisis. Citizens must understand that democracy is a process—not a finished product—and that controversy and conflict are essential to its success. For example, liberty and equality have been in conflict often in our past; yet both are fundamental values of American democracy. Students must learn that citizens are called upon to engage in the ongoing debate about the nature and purpose of constitutional government.

History, along with other humanities, helps develop a well-rounded person equipped to build a life of dignity and fulfillment. It creates connections with people in other cultures and places us in the chain that links the past and the future. The enjoyment of freedom and free choice comes from knowing the alternatives possible in public and private life. History opens the great casebook of human experience and helps prepare students for fruitful private life and public action.

Preparation for work also is supported by historical study. History is a foundation for such careers as law, journalism, diplomacy, government service, teaching, management, and international business.

In the recent past, reports from government agencies, private foundations, and noted individuals have called for more history for all students. The reports rest on the premise that the success or failure of the American democratic system depends on an enlightened citizenry, knowledgeable about its nation's history and committed to its shared civic values. ***Lessons From History*** provides a common core of content, understandings, and historical perspectives upon which this curriculum can be built.

What and How Much History Should Be Taught? The importance of history requires a significant increase in the time currently devoted to the subject in most schools. No less than four full years of history should be required of all students between grades 7-12, and the K-6 grades should include history in ways appropriate to the capabilities and interests of the students. No less than three full years of U.S. history should be required, with two of those years offered between grades 7-12. Two years of world history should be required, with at least one of those years at the senior high school level.

Selecting the specific historical topics and content for both world and United States history requires an organizational structure based on enduring themes and questions that exemplify the human experience. These themes must span the great sweep of human history, from prehistory to the present, and must illustrate the interaction of major forces of continuity and change. They also must help students develop a basic framework in which major events and turning points in history are linked to their antecedents, their consequences, and their relationships to the contemporary world. The following major themes are presented in ***Lessons From History.***

• **Major Themes in United States History**	• **Major Themes in World History**
I. The Gathering of the Many Peoples Who Have Made Up and Are Still Transforming U.S. Society	I. The Development and Changing Character of Human Societies
II. The Economic and Technological Transformation of the United States From Colonial Days to the Present	II. The Economic and Technological Development of Human Societies in the Quest to Sustain and Improve Life
III. Change and Continuity in American Culture, Thought and Education, in Religious and Moral Values	III. Peoples' Development of Their Understandings of Themselves, Their Moral Imperatives, and Place in the Universe
IV. Democracy's Evolution in the United States and Our Changing Global Role	IV. The Development of Political Theories and Organization

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- *Major Theme I: The Development and Changing Character of Human Societies.* This theme includes a focus on human organizations from the prehistoric family through contemporary social and political structures. Attention is given to the movement and interaction of peoples throughout history for economic, political, and social reasons. It is important to examine ways societies have viewed the individual and to examine the impact of such developments as changes in gender roles and efforts to expand political and economic participation to other groups in the society. The multicultural foundation and evolution of American society is included in this theme.
- *Major Theme II: The Economic and Technological Development of Societies, Resulting in the Continual Quest to Sustain and Improve the Quality of Life.* In world history, this theme includes developments from tool-making and fire-making to the post-industrial world. In U.S. history, the focus is on economic transformation from a group of pre-industrial colonies to today's technology-driven society. Examples such as the emergence of agriculture and printing would be used in world history. The development of the iron-tipped plow and the use of computers are good examples of this theme in U.S. history. It also includes discussion of the positive and negative impact of human development on the environment and possible futures for science and technology.
- *Major Theme III: Peoples' Understanding of Themselves, Their Place in the Universe, and the Quest for Meaning.* This theme focuses on fundamental questions about humankind's place in the universe, the nature of justice, and the role of the individual. In world history; these include religions, moral philosophies, and political ideologies. In U.S. history, it would also include such topics as the rise and development of the public schools.
- *Major Theme IV: The Development of Political Theories and the Development of Democracy.* This theme examines comparative political structures and their underlying principles. The development of political philosophy and related topics such as imperialism, revolutions, and the evolution of national states and regional/world mechanisms are also included.

Each of these four major narrative themes forms the framework for more than a dozen recommended U.S. history units and six world history units. All units are arranged chronologically and include major unit themes, major topics and their development, essential understandings, and related background for teachers.

How Should History Be Presented? Developing a rationale for history and selecting the content are two legs of a three-legged stool. The third factor included in ***Lessons From History*** recommends seven principles that are associated with effective teaching and learning of history.

- *Chronological, Analytical Narrative.* History's power flows from its narrative character. Chronology serves not only as the organizing core for the human experience, it can help bring structure and understanding to the social sciences.
- *Interpretation of Narrative.* Studying history means more than remembering answers. It must include evaluating historical information and reflecting on different interpretations of historical events.
- *Inclusiveness.* Both U.S. and world history must tell the story of all the world's peoples—men and women of all classes and conditions, ethnic and racial origins, national and religious backgrounds.
- *Pausing for Depth.* It takes time to analyze and evaluate historical information. It is important to select some topics for in-depth study and the examination of primary documents.
- *Contingency and Complexity.* The past must be seen on its own terms, not through today's values. Students must see that individual and group decisions shaped history and that some stories might have turned out differently.
- *Exploring Causality.* Depth and narrative help students grapple with the historical question of causality. Why and how did things happen? How is one event related to another?
- *Active Learning and Critical Inquiry.* Direct contact with historical documents and different interpretations help students understand the complexity and adventure in history. Teachers should use active learning strategies appropriate to the content and student capabilities.

Lessons From History can be ordered from the National Center for History in the Schools, UCLA, 405 Hilgard Avenue, Los Angeles, CA 90024; telephone (310) 825-4702.

Reference and ERIC Resources

The following list includes references used to prepare this Digest and related history/social studies documents. The items followed by an ED number are available in microfiche and/or paper copies from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For information about prices, contact EDRS, 7420 Fullerton Road, Suite 110, Springfield, Virginia; telephone numbers are (703)440-1400 and (800)443-3742. Entries followed by an EJ number, annotated monthly in CURRENT INDEX TO JOURNALS IN EDUCATION (CIJE), are not available through EDRS. However, they can be located in the journal section of most libraries by using the bibliographic information provided, requested through Interlibrary Loan, or ordered from UMI or ISI reprint services.

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This publication was prepared with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. RI88062009. The opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of OERI or ED.